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ABSTRACT

It is common knowledge that advances in technology are creating more connections between people and places that previously were considered to be worlds apart. This has significant implications for college students preparing to enter the workforce. Internships abroad can be a valuable means for career exploration, skill development, and creating an international network. Maximizing the benefits of an overseas internship requires extensive planning. College and university professionals can play a valuable role in assisting students with their planning. This paper is written to identify considerations and resources that advisors can share with students as they contemplate interning abroad. (GCP)

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The Not So Accidental Tourist—Internships Abroad

by
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The Not So Accidental Tourist – Internships Abroad

Marcie Kirk Holland

Introduction

It is common knowledge that advances in technology are creating more connections between people and places that previously were considered to be worlds apart. This has significant implications for college students preparing to enter the work force. How can they find their place in this more complex, rapidly changing work place? How can they develop the skills that will allow them to take their place once they identify it? Internships abroad can be a valuable means for career exploration, skill development and creating an international network. Maximizing the benefits of an overseas internship requires extensive planning. College and university professionals can play a valuable role in assisting students with their planning. Quality learning outcomes are no accident. They are the result of research, soul searching, goal clarification and a lot of motivation. This paper is written to identify considerations and resources that advisors can share with students as they contemplate interning abroad.

The University of California, Davis Internship & Career Center places nearly 6,000 students in internships each year. Demand for overseas opportunities has been on the rise for several years. Advising students on international internship issues is far more complex than domestic internship advising. It requires a balance between encouragement, reality checking and resource referral. It has been a rewarding, and at times frustrating, experience trying to meet the interests and needs of students with the ambition to go abroad, not just to travel or study, but to work and intern. We have learned some valuable lessons and hope that others can benefit from our experience, and hopefully avoid some of our mishaps. You should realize, however, that there will be mishaps. There are so many variables when working with overseas placements that you must expect the unexpected. Like the students going abroad, overseas internship coordinators must learn to be resourceful, creative, problem-solvers. The rewards come from working with truly amazing students with aspirations and abilities that will inspire you – and expand your horizons. Examples of overseas internships UCD students have completed include: internships in US embassies world-wide, engineering projects in Germany and Japan,

teaching ESL world-wide, working on war crime tribunals in Kosovo and Rwanda, working in wineries around the world, international public health projects in numerous developing countries, water quality experiments on Lake Bikhal in the former Soviet Union, and many more. I will initially address some of the theoretical bases for overseas internships and their value in career development. I will then provide some resources and issues to consider when working with students interested in interning abroad.

For the purposes of this paper, an internship is considered to be an experiential learning opportunity that builds upon the theoretical foundations learned in the classroom and exposes students to the type of work individuals at entry-level perform in an industry they have considered pursuing. It is implicit that students develop skills that will increase their marketability when they enter the labor force (following graduation). In other words, internships help people clarify their career goals while they build the skills they will need to attain those goals. Most internships discussed here are 10-12 weeks in duration. There are a few notable exceptions that will be discussed in the Recommended Organizations section of this paper. For the most part, however, experiences that are much shorter than 10 weeks do not allow sufficient immersion and acclimation.

Research on learning styles, life span development, and experiential learning has documented for decades that internships are a valuable mechanism for integrating theories and concepts from course work into meaningful applications (Chickering & Associates, 1981). Additionally, internships are a welcomed alternative to a classroom environment for kinesthetic learners. They get to learn by doing! Internships foster growth by building confidence as individuals accomplish tasks, develop skills and find a framework in which they can apply their education. Additionally, they begin to see the nexus of course material and their own body of knowledge from their unique life experiences and perspectives (Chickering & Associates, 1981). This is often a phase in which students clarify their career interests and modify their career/life plan.

Beyond career clarification and skill development, overseas internships foster the kind of personal growth that today's world demands. Colin Campbell addresses this need in his 1998 book *Jobscape: Career Survival in the Global Economy,* "... you will have to understand not only the changes that are taking place [in the global economy], but yourself as well. Only when both of these pieces are in place will you be able to thrive in the new economy." Personal growth, maturity, creative problem-solving, cross-cultural tolerance, adaptability, flexibility and often a sense of humor are common attributes of overseas interns when they return (Hannigan, 2003). Admittedly, many of the students that are drawn to an overseas internship

have an adventurous nature. The overseas experience allows it to blossom and mature. Being away from home fosters individuation. It also allows students to see themselves and their country in a new light. Again, this is an ability that will prepare them for the global work place. The phrase "thinking outside the box" has become cliché. It does, nonetheless, aptly describe the ability to "get enough distance to begin to see the overall pattern of relationships..." (Campbell, 1998). The physical distance of an overseas internship provides this perspective. For many students that perspective remains with them for the rest of their life.

The three to six month duration of most internships certainly allows students to move beyond the status of a casual tourist, observing how others live. They get to live the life of locals. They develop networks of contacts and undoubtedly meet people that challenge their world view. A transferable job skill in itself, this kind of flexibility is at the core of career development. Today's rapidly changing world means that it is inevitable that even the best laid career plans are subject to change and that life will present opportunities that shape our careers (Krumboltz, Levin and Mitchell, 1999). For example, "John," a UC Davis intern in the US Embassy in Germany, was working when the US Embassy in Africa was bombed. Immediately, German (and world-wide) media outlets began to contact the embassy. John was the only person in the office that was wearing a suit jacket that day. So, as a junior in college, he became the spokesperson for the US government. John is now a Foreign Service Officer with the US Department of State. The impact of his overseas internship is clear.

Employers and professional schools are aware of the value overseas experiences provide. Language skills are certainly highly valued, but are only a part of the appeal of those with overseas experiences. Medical schools are interested in applicants who have been willing to move out of their comfort zones and place themselves in the position of "other." These applicants show promise that they will be able to empathize with patients from other countries. In today's more interdependent world it is inevitable that cross-cultural understanding and acceptance will be assets employers expect from their employees. As Mark Twain said, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness."

The next section of this paper will address issues that college and university advisors and counselors should consider when working with students interested in overseas placements. It is by no means comprehensive. Additional research is strongly encouraged. Many of these issues relate to averting potential problems; they are included to inform, not dissuade. The vast majority of overseas internships are very successful.

Emotional Preparedness

Sometimes issues that can be kept in check in relatively familiar settings become problematic when one is in a setting overseas, where little is familiar. Ultimately, most students find that a new environment fosters new problem-solving skills, accompanied by increased confidence. However, this is not always a comfortable process. Students often find themselves stretching beyond what they anticipated. Flexibility and problem-solving skills are key to surviving these periods of growth. Advisors and counselors can help prepare students by alerting them to this possibility and discussing coping skills that they can draw upon while abroad. We have even helped students interning in the same city connect so that they could be running partners and exercise together to manage stress.

Emotional Maturity

It is worthwhile to mention emotional maturity separate from emotional preparedness. Going abroad often causes people to question their self-concept. If this is not sufficiently developed, difficulties that could interfere with appropriate work place performance can arise. As in any internship placement, student attitude dictates outcome (see Skill Preparedness, below).

Culture Shock

The culture shock that accompanies going abroad is certainly something college and university counselors and advisors are encouraged to discuss with prospective overseas interns. Are their coping skills dependent upon a localized system of support? How will their coping skills travel? It is important for students to think about how they will address culture shock, and for advisors to let them know that it may happen to them. It appears to be inevitable. Photos of family and friends, an e-mail account that works well abroad, and international telephone cards all have proven to be resources that help students make the adjustment to life away from home. Reverse culture shock, at the conclusion of the internship when the student returns to their home campus, can be equally, if not more difficult. We have found that debriefing sessions and connecting with other returnees can ease the re-acclimation process.

Safety and Security

Post September 11th, security is an issue that must be addressed. The US Department of State web site (www.state.gov) has guidelines for Americans traveling abroad.

Skill Preparedness

Expectation management is one of the key responsibilities of college and university counselors and advisors working with students interested in participating in an overseas internship. As with internships in the US, student involvement with projects and activities at an internship site may be limited by licensure requirements, lack of skills and limited experience. The same may be true overseas, with the added difficulty of limited language skills. I mention this because students planning to participate in study abroad programs often hope to incorporate an internship into their experience. Though laudable, most find that this is not as practical as it sounds. Because so many study abroad programs focus on language acquisition, often a student's language ability is not sufficient for placement until the final semester of the study abroad. By this time they are generally immersed in extra-curricular activities that preclude them from making a commitment to an internship for the standard 10 hours per week for 10 weeks.

I consider self-reliance a skill. It is a very important skill for overseas interns. It plays a central role in allowing students to acknowledge, appreciate and respect that internship sponsors generally are making significant investments of time and training resources to host them. Sometimes when students pay a fee for placement assistance, which is not uncommon for overseas internship development, they sometimes seem to feel as though they have already made their investment in the internship, that they are owed special treatment. They sometimes forget that the internship sponsor (who undoubtedly did not receive a fee for taking the intern) is acting as a good will ambassador by working with someone who actually may require more time and energy than a local student intern would. Reminding students that they are essentially representing their university and the US to those they meet abroad can address this issue. Educating students about the labor-intensive nature of overseas internship development and justification for paying fees can often squelch any potential resentment. The focus can shift to factors that the student can control such as demonstrating enthusiasm on the internship and making the most of their time in another country.

For those truly interested in an internship abroad, sometimes they must choose between spending a quarter or semester working in the US gaining skills, experience and contacts in a specific career field or going abroad where the career-related skills may not be as specific, but the language and cultural immersion are an important part of their career/life plan. For example, one pre-med student from UC Davis, unable to find a health-related internship in Japan, chose to spend a summer in Japan working as a mentor to "at-risk" youth. She decided that practicing her language skills in Japan was more important than working in a hospital setting, which she

could do in Davis during the academic year.

Work Authorization

Work authorization is an added, and often overlooked, complexity of internships abroad. Some countries mandate that any activity in which someone will be "working" in their country requires a work permit, whether paid or not. Because immigration laws are constantly being revised and interpreted differently, it is imperative that students investigate the regulations in the country in which they will intern. Once again, the US Department of State is a worthwhile starting point (www.state.gov).

Housing

This is another issue that can easily be taken for granted. Most other countries do not have the same housing standards as the US. This can be surprising and problematic for overseas interns who may already be experiencing stress over adjusting to a new culture. Inadequate housing can devastate an internship. For example, there is a case of two enthusiastic UC Davis interns doing an internship which involved public health projects to help women and children in the slums of a very poor country. This was an internship arranged through UC Davis, not an internship placement organization. The students were to work under the guidance of a highly regarded UC Davis alumna from that country. The students fully understood that they would be working in abject poverty. So it was very surprising to get an urgent call from the very distraught interns that there housing was not acceptable. Special effort had been taken to find the housing which, for that community, was very nice. Despite the commitment and enthusiasm they had expressed pre-departure, the level of discomfort the students experienced was unbearable for them. They left the internship in less than five days. Obviously, the circumstances surrounding this internship are more complex than housing alone, but housing was the issue that was the most tangible. This experience heightened our awareness of liability issues and the difficulty of quality control measures from such a distance. It further pushed us to work more with existing placement organizations. We also no longer choose to assist students directly with housing arrangements abroad.

Home-stays with families are common for overseas interns. Some, but not all, include room and board. It is important to clarify this up-front. It is also important to clarify how payment will be made to the hosts. Is it included in the fee paid for finding the home stay? Does the employer include rent as part of the hiring agreement? Many foreign companies provide employee housing (usually dormitory-style) to employees. Some consider this a perk, others charge a fee. Obviously, it is important to understand the agreement prior to departure. Planning to arrange for

housing upon arrival abroad is strongly discouraged.

Evaluating Organizations and Opportunities

The number of details involved with arranging overseas internships often precludes a campus career advisor from being able to coordinate overseas placements directly. Making referrals that match the interests, budget and abilities of the student is common. Additionally, expect that students will come to you for assistance in assessing the legitimacy and "match" of overseas opportunities they have discovered. The Internet created an explosion of organizations that claim to be able to place people in exotic overseas opportunities. Students have paid fees to placement organizations only to find that the groups deliver no services. It should also be noted that higher priced programs are not necessarily higher quality. To get started working with overseas placements it is important to work with well-respected organizations that have infrastructure and a proven track record for quality placements abroad. Organizations should have alumni that are available to answer questions you or the student have about the firm itself and the services they provide. In his book *International Job Finder, Where the Jobs Are Worldwide*, Daniel Lauber provides worthwhile tips on avoiding international job scams. Many of these apply to international internships as well.

Recommended Organizations

The following three organizations offer internships that have provided very high quality, overseas internships for UC Davis students. The first two charge fees for the extensive behind-the-scenes work they undertake making arrangements. This is very common. Most organizations will require a deposit when initially working with students. Too many overseas internship brokers have gone to the expense of making internship and housing arrangements, only to find students had changed their mind about interning. A deposit demonstrates commitment.

International Cooperative Education (www.icemenlo.com)

Located in Menlo Park, CA, the principal of this small organization is passionate about the importance of intercultural exchange! He has been arranging overseas internships for over 30 years. The program offers opportunities on every continent and for every discipline. The fees are very reasonable. In 2003, students paid about $900 for internship placement, housing arrangements, and work permit.

Child and Family Health International (www.cfhi.org)

This organization offers intensive health-related internships in developing countries world wide. Though many students participate for as little as four weeks, their experience is intensive and meets the rigor one would expect in an internship. Students get hands-on experiences with patients that are not available in the US. Visit their website for cost information. A UC Davis student that participated in this program described her justification for this program cost by comparing it to a useful MCAT Prep course which cost nearly $1,000. She is now on her way to medical school and says that the fees for CHFI were a much more beneficial investment in her goal to become a doctor. As a career counselor, I appreciate the kind of in-depth exposure to the field of medicine that this program provides. After this internship, students will have a deeper understanding of what it really takes to be a physician, and if it is an appropriate match for them.

United States Department of State (www.state.gov)

Commonly held as one of the quintessential internship options anywhere, because, as discussed earlier in this paper in the case of "John," the State Department gives interns a great deal of responsibility in embassies around the world. The screening process can be rigorous, but this internship is certainly attainable for many of the students you will see. The State Department is interested in individuals from all disciplines. Students must allow nine months for security clearance. There are no fees for the internship, however students generally must pay for their own expenses while abroad (housing, food, etc.).

Funding Resources

Funding, or the lack thereof, is one of the stumbling blocks some students encounter when exploring an overseas internship. There actually are a number of funding options. It should also be noted that selection of which internship sponsoring organization one selects can have a significant impact on costs. The most expensive programs are not necessarily the highest quality.

Rotary Foundation (www.rotary.org)

Rotary is an organization of business and professional leaders united worldwide who provide humanitarian service, encourage high ethical standards in all vocations, and help build goodwill and peace in the world. In 166 countries worldwide, approximately 1.2 million Rotarians belong to more than 30,000 Rotary clubs. Rotary funds a number of programs. Visit the website above for more details.

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Financial Aid

Do not forget financial aid. There are many nuances to financial aid eligibility and campus policies on units of credit for internship. Students are encouraged to investigate this as an option on their campus.

Clubs and Philanthropic Groups

One UC Davis student spoke to the local Soroptomists International (a volunteer service organization for women in business, management and the professions) chapter and requested that the club support her internship assisting women in Barbados with ecotourism business ventures. Though the chapter did not have any kind of travel grant or appropriate scholarship fund at the time, two members approached the student after her presentation and wrote personal checks for the amount of her travel costs! The club also decided to create a special scholarship fund to encourage young women to pursue overseas opportunities.

Churches

Many congregations offer funds for humanitarian projects (local and international).

Conclusion

UC Davis students have had very positive learning outcomes from overseas internships. However, developing and participating in an overseas internship requires significant planning. It is highly likely that students from other campuses can benefit from the experiences of UC Davis students, which are synthesized in this paper. The intent of this paper is to provide students and their college and university counselors and advisors with resources and factors to consider when contemplating an overseas internship. This includes tips on evaluating organizations that coordinate overseas internships, along with a list of a few organizations that UC Davis has successfully worked with. It also includes several obvious but often overlooked considerations that, when addressed, will improve the chances for a successful overseas internship experience. Finally, funding resources are discussed briefly because this is one consideration that often deters students from participating in an overseas internship. It need not. Students drawn to overseas experiences tend to be adventuresome, free-spirited and creative. They tend to be "big thinkers." Often their enthusiasm is contagious. Advisors and counselors can provide a valuable service by helping students ground their dreams in reality so that they can take shape. You are likely to gain a vicarious uplift from watching the process unfold.

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Lauber, D. (2002). *International job finder, Where the jobs are worldwide*, River Forest, IL : p. 13 - 17.

Krumboltz, J.D, Levin, A.S. & Mitchell, K.E. (1999). Planned happenstance: Constructing unexpected career opportunities, *Journal of Counseling & Development*, Volume 77.

Recommended Resources

Alexander W. Astin, *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years, Revisited.* San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1993. Using results from a longitudinal study of 24,847 students from 309 campuses, Astin addresses ways to enhance learning. His findings substantiate the importance of experiential learning (internships, particularly with faculty and community service) as a step in student's development and ownership of creating their own positive learning outcomes.

Nancy Mueller, *Work Worldwide, International Career Strategies for the Adventurous Job Seeker*, John Muir Publications, Emeryville, CA (2000). This book provides practical information on working abroad and insights gathered from interviews with expatriates in an easy to follow format.

Eric Olson, Jim Blau, *Job Surfing: Working Abroad, Using the Internet to Find a Job and Get Hired,* Princeton Review Publishing (2002). This book provides a comprehensive, step by step approach to the overseas job search, including two chapters devoted to internship search. This book is a valuable resource because it guides those with a non-technical background through Internet searches and postings and online portfolios that includes résumé, writing samples, etc. It also includes job search case studies from at least one individual working on each continent.

Betty Sederquist in conjunction with the Sacramento Regional Center for International Trade Development, *A Handbook for Global Careers, An International Perspective for the Sacramento Region and Beyond* (2003)

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